

Not Conformed but Transformed (Romans 12:1-2)

Big Idea: In response to God's lavish grace, surrender everything, including what you're most tempted to believe.

Ten years ago, Becket Cook was a gay agnostic man in Hollywood who had achieved great success as a set designer in the fashion industry. He worked with stars and supermodels traveling the world to design photo shoots for glossy magazines. He attended award shows and parties at the homes of famous people. He spent summers swimming in Drew Barrymore's pool. He rubbed shoulders with people like Natalie Portman, Katy Perry, Paris Hilton, Nicole Kidman, Natalie Portman, and Oprah Winfrey.

But then everything changed. Ten years ago this month, he saw a group of people chatting over Bibles in a coffee shop in L.A. They invited him to church. He took them up on their invitation where he heard the gospel.

Listen to his description of what happened:

As he preached, every sentence that came out of his mouth resonated as truthful to me. It was strange, and I had no idea why. My thoughts kept exclaiming, Yes, that's true . . . Yes, that's true . . . Yes, that's true! . . . At one point, I remember thinking, This is the gospel? What he was saying was turning everything I thought I knew about religion on its head. I was stunned by the utter simplicity of it.

He went forward for prayer, said, "Hi. I'm not a Christian, and I don't know what I believe, but I'm here." He went to sit down and something happened that changed the rest of his life:

All of a sudden, a giant wave of God's presence came crashing over me. A flood of intense warmth, emotion, and power coursed through me ...

Then it happened. I don't know how to describe it other than to say that God revealed himself to me. In that moment, everything became clear: God was real, Jesus was real, the Bible was real, the resurrection was real, heaven was real, hell was real—it was all real. Everything that I had dismissed as a fairy tale was all true.

My sins were forgiven, and I was reconciled to God through Christ. Every Christian term I had heard over the years to describe this indescribable reality was appropriate: "saved," "born again," "regenerated," "adopted into the family of God," "given eternal life"!

He didn't expect it. He was completely changed.

How do you respond to something like this? He found that he started to change. He immediately felt convicted about sinful behavior in his life, about things that were very significant to him. These changes didn't happen as a result of study. They just happened.

Other things happened too. He used to find reading the Bible boring and tedious. "Suddenly the Bible became the most fascinating book in the world. As I read it, the words seemed to jump off the page and began to make sense." He found himself hungry for sermon podcasts. He even cancelled his cable TV and magazine subscriptions and stopped listening to his favorite radio station. "I just wanted to hear truth all day long and be immersed in the Bible, sermons, and worship music," he writes.

I love this story because it's a reminder of how God works. You don't know how God will use you. You could be sitting in Balzac's or William's Landing, and God could use your presence there with open Bibles to spark a conversation that completely changes somebody for eternity. Never underestimate what God can do through you and through the simple preaching of the gospel in the church.

But I like this story for another reason. I like conversion stories. I love the truth that God mercifully transforms believers from enemies to sons and daughters who are at peace with him. He forgives us, completely on his initiative, as a free gift with no help from us. It's a free and gracious gift that we receive by faith. He makes us right with himself, justifies us, unites us with Christ, moves us from death to life, and sets us free.

I never get tired of thinking about this. Maybe you're like Becket Cook. Maybe you're here today and you've never believed this up until now, but you know every word is true. I pray to God and I urge you: receive this new gift today. It will completely change you. It is the best gift you could ever receive. God's lavish grace is unbelievable.

What Should We Do in Response?

The question comes, though: What should we do in response? God completely changes you. You become a new person. What do you do then? Does it mean that you just start going to church? What exactly does it look like?

Paul answers this question for us in Romans 12:1:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Here's the heart of Paul's appeal: **offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God in response to what he's done for you.**

I don't know about you, but this raises questions. What does he mean? The word "offer" is one that was commonly used of slaughtering animals as a sacrifice. Here's the thing about a sacrifice: there's no way to go halfway. A sacrifice is all in or it's not at all.

What Paul is saying here is this: God has given you everything. What does he expect from you? He expects all of you. Your body is the totality of who you are – more than your skin and bones. He wants total commitment.

God doesn't want part of your life. He wants it all. God doesn't want 90 minutes of your week; he wants all seven days. God wants every part of your life: your finances, your sexuality, your time, your relationships, and most of all your affections.

C.S. Lewis gets it right:

He cannot bless us unless he has us. When we try to keep within us an area that is our own, we try to keep an area of death. Therefore, in love, He claims all. There's no bargaining with Him.

"In love, he claims it all. There's no bargaining with him." What do we do in response to God's grace? Surrender everything. From now on, it's all his. He burns with passion for us. He wants us, all of us.

Let's Get Practical

Let's get practical. That's great in theory, but what does it mean?

Verse 2 tells us:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

There are two parts to this. Here's the first part.

Don't be conformed to this world.

This is so important. We've got to camp here for a moment. I don't think I've ever realized how important these words are.

Paul says that we're not to be conformed to something. Conformed means to become behaviorally or socially similar to something. It means to be shaped or molded by something.

So what are we to avoid being shaped by? Paul says "this world." "This world" means "a particular stage of history understood according to its values, beliefs, and morals." Paul says that we're supposed to understand our current cultural moment, and to take action to avoid being shaped by the values, beliefs, and morals that our culture holds.

Sometimes when someone becomes a Christian, a friend or family member will say that they've been brainwashed. But as N.T. Wright notes, "If anything, it's our surrounding culture that brainwashes us, persuading us in a thousand subtle ways..."

How are we being brainwashed? What are some of the values and morals that are shaping us, that we must resist? Well, here are some of them.

The average person in the West carries around in their head a set of assumptions that are culturally imbibed. Assumptions such as the idea that spirituality is preferable to organized religion, that love is a feeling not a discipline, that if something is mundane it must be boring, that individual freedom trumps the collective, that travel broadens the mind, or that we can do what we like as long as it does not hurt anybody... (Mark Sayers, [The Road Trip that Changed the World](#))

Our culture tells us a lot of things:

- God is okay, but he belongs in your private life.
- Be true to yourself.
- Follow your heart.
- Find yourself.
- Find out what makes you happy, and do that.
- As long as it doesn't hurt anybody, it's okay.

In response to God's grace, Paul says we must identify messages like these – values and beliefs of our age – and refuse to be shaped by them. The very points where we are tempted to adapt to keep up with the times are the points where Christianity is most needed. "The great need of the world is a church that offers something other than the echo of its own times" (Trevin Wax).

We are tempted to the Christian faith to the values and beliefs of our age. That's the way it's always been. Yet it is exactly at these points that Christianity has a message for the world.

Again, think of the C.S. Lewis quote:

He cannot bless us unless he has us. When we try to keep within us an area that is our own, we try to keep an area of death. Therefore, in love, He claims all. There's no bargaining with Him.

It's not because he wants to make our lives hard. It's because he wants our hearts. He wants to get rid of all the areas of death in our lives. So recognize the values and beliefs of our age that try to shape us more than God's love, and refuse to be shaped by them.

The question, of course, is how. That brings us to the second part of what Paul says we should do.

Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.

Our minds need renewing. We need to think differently. Notice a couple of things about this. It doesn't say to transform your mind; it says to be transformed. We don't do this; the Holy Spirit does, and we cooperate. The other thing that's clear in this verse is that this is a continual process. The Spirit keeps renewing our minds. This will keep on going for the rest of our lives.

The result of this renewal of our mind is that we will be able to discern what's pleasing to God. It's like we'll gain the ability to understand what God wants and what is right. We'll stop being shaped by the world and we'll start to be shaped by God instead.

Why I'm Saying This

Let me tell you why I am preaching this sermon today.

We think that Satan's strategy is to get us to engage in gross sin: to get us hooked on pornography, or to get us to stop believing in God, or to become addicted to drugs and that kind of thing. No doubt, those things are bad. But most of the time I think Satan is a little more subtle than that.

Satan's strategy isn't that obvious. Satan's strategy is to tell us lies, and for us to believe them without even realizing it. Then we go to church and worship God every week while being completely unaware that our minds are completely shaped by values and beliefs that oppose him.

There is an invisible but intelligent evil at work in the world, but his primary strategy isn't what most of us expect. It's lies. Fighting the devil is first and foremost about the war to believe truth over lies.

So here's our job as Christians: "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ..." (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Again:

He cannot bless us unless he has us. When we try to keep within us an area that is our own, we try to keep an area of death. Therefore, in love, He claims all. There's no bargaining with Him.

You believe. I'm so glad you do. That's a good start.

In response to God's lavish grace, surrender everything, including what you think and value.

That's what happened to Becket Cook. He went from agnostic/atheist to child of God, but it didn't stop there.

Upon my conversion, God gave me a new heart and put his Spirit in me (Ezek. 36:26), and that transformed what my heart wanted. Now my heart wants to be obedient to God, not conform to the passions of my former ignorance; in other words, to be holy because God is holy (1 Peter 1:14-16). My heart wants to please him because of the great love with which he loved me (Eph. 2:4). My heart wants to present my body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him (Rom. 12:1).

Not only did he receive God's grace, but he changed. He changed his identity, his beliefs about sexuality, what he listened to, what he watched on TV. Why? Because Jesus is better. Because it's hard to believe what culture says when you've been captivated by what Almighty God says.

"I don't want to be true to myself," he says. "I want to be true to God and his Word." How about you?

Father, you want all of us. And yet we've bought into the world's values and beliefs without even knowing it. I pray that today we would present our bodies – all of us – as living sacrifices. I pray that today we would stop being conformed to our culture's values, and instead be transformed by what you say is right. May we do this not in our power but through your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.